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SUBJECT: RAUL CASTRO VISITS NAMIBIA

REF: WINDHOEK 235

Classified By: Ambassador Dennise Mathieu for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Following on the heels of a much-publicized visit by Russian president Dmitry Medvedev (reftel), the Government of Namibia welcomed Cuban President Raul Castro Ruz on July 19 to Windhoek. The day-and-a-half-long visit, Castro's first to the southern African country, included a meeting with President Hifikepunye Pohamba, a state dinner, a meeting with former president Sam Nujoma, and a visit to Heroes Acre, but did not include the signing of cooperative agreements. End Summary.

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Renewing Friendship, Expanding Cooperation  
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¶2. (U) On July 19 and 20, Cuban President Raul Castro Ruz, in Africa to attend the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Cairo, stopped briefly in Namibia before continuing on to Angola. Castro was accompanied by the Army Corps General Leopoldo Cintra Frias, Vice President of the Council of Ministers Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz, Minister of Foreign Affairs Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, and other members of the parliament. Flanked by cultural performers and a flag-waving crowd of Namibians dressed in the colors of the ruling Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), the Cuban president was welcomed at the airport by President Hifikepunye Pohamba, Prime Minister Nahas Angula, several ministers, and several Cubans residing in Namibia.

¶3. (U) During an evening meeting at State House on July 19, Pohamba and Castro reaffirmed their countries' friendship and expressed a desire to strengthen ties. Pohamba told the press after the discussion that Cuba could assist Namibia with the maintenance of roads and other infrastructure as well as the repair of government-owned plants and machinery. He suggested that the Cuban government could also provide training for the new school of medicine, which has yet to break ground, and the new engineering school at the University of Namibia. Without elaborating, Pohamba noted that Namibia would welcome Cuban government assistance on issues related to agriculture, food security, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, as well as maritime management.

¶4. (U) In a joint communique, Castro and Pohamba attested to their desire to expand bilateral cooperation on pressing global issues. Both presidents agreed to undertake joint efforts to contribute towards building world peace, reforming the United Nations system, strengthening the UN General Assembly, promoting sustainable development, confronting climate change, and opening dialogue on human rights. In addition, both leaders expressed their belief that the global financial crisis demands the establishment of a new economic, commercial, and financial world order that takes into account the interests of developing countries.

15. (U) Cuban-Namibian cooperation builds on a friendship that predates independence. The Cuban government provided military personnel and equipment to the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military wing of SWAPO during the liberation struggle. After independence, Namibia and Cuba signed several bilateral agreements, most notably one which established the Joint Commission for Economic, Scientific, Technical and Trade Cooperation. New areas of engagement, in the health, environment, trade, and other sectors, were announced in June during the tenth session of the joint commission of cooperation between Cuba and Namibia, which took place in Havana. For years, the Cuban government has supplied doctors to Namibia (currently 143) as well as offered scholarships and educational opportunities in Cuba to Namibian students (currently 130).

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Pomp and Circumstance  
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16. (C) At a state banquet in Castro's honor, Pohamba gave a speech celebrating Cuban-Namibian friendship. In his remarks, he called for the immediate release of the "Cuban Five." For his part, Castro thanked Namibia for standing by his country through hurricanes and "an economic blockade and aggression for over 40 years." According to one guest, the leisurely dinner featured several songs performed by the Namibia-Cuba Friendship Association, a group representing the 600 refugees who fled to Cuba during the independence struggle. In addition, Fisheries and Marine Resource Minister Abraham Iyambo, who studied in Cuba, made a speech in fluent Spanish. On a side note, Marco Hausiku, Minister of Foreign Affairs and former PLAN fighter, brought a photograph of and subsequently located a Cuban fighter with whom he served at the battle of Cuito Canavale.

17. (U) Before departing, Castro paid a visit to former president and founding father Sam Nujoma at which he declared Cuba's commitment to continue its robust relationship with Namibia. Accompanied by Pohamba, Castro then laid a wreath at Heroes Acre, Namibia's monument to those who died during the liberation struggle.

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Comment  
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18. (C) Heavy on ceremony and light on substance, Castro's brief visit underscored the strong friendship between Namibia and Cuba. No new agreements were signed during the visit, and the joint communique reads similarly to the one Pohamba signed with Medvedev during the Russian president's visit in June. Pohamba's banquet speech, described as "way over-the-top" by one diplomat in attendance, and his airport welcome, may have provided Pohamba with an opportunity to campaign informally for the general election in November. Cuba's support of SWAPO during the liberation struggle still resonates strongly with many Namibians. Similarly, Cuba's assistance in the education and health sectors is widely known and appreciated.

MATHIEU